Personal rules experiment

Make a specific prediction and a fair test. Plan any safeguards before practice; record observations afterwards.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.

BEFORE PRACTICE

Personal rule / prediction / belief 0-100%

e.g. Everything must be perfect. A small error means failure. Belief 85%.

Task / reasonable standard

e.g. A routine email; make it clear, polite and accurate.

What to change / precautions / when to finish

e.g. One normal review, then send; keep required checks for important details.

AFTER PRACTICE - observations and learning

What happened?

e.g. Sent the email; the recipient understood it.

Learning / a more flexible rule

e.g. Clear enough can be useful. Some uncertainty remained.

Next step

e.g. Try the same standard on another low-stakes task.

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Using this resource

Personal rules experiment

What this helps with

Personal rules can provide direction, but very rigid standards may make ordinary tasks take far more time and energy than they need. An experiment tests one prediction about changing a rule slightly. It does not ask you to become careless or lower important professional standards. Choose a low-stakes task where a reasonable standard is clear. The learning comes from observing the result, not simply telling yourself to stop being a perfectionist.

How to use it

1. Write the rule and identify how it affects time, effort or recovery.
2. Choose a low-risk task and define a reasonable standard in advance.
3. Predict what would happen if you reduced one unnecessary extra effort.
4. Try the agreed change without replacing it with reassurance or hidden rechecking.
5. Compare the result with the prediction and consider a more flexible rule.

A fictional worked example

Sofia spent half an hour rewriting informal messages about social plans because she feared sounding thoughtless. She chose one low-stakes message and agreed a reasonable standard: clear, polite and accurate. Her prediction was that sending it after one ordinary read-through would lead to criticism. She sent the message and returned to another activity without asking a friend to check it. The reply simply confirmed the plan. Sofia noticed that she still felt uncertain for a while, but had saved time. Her new rule was that everyday messages can be considerate without being polished repeatedly. She did not apply the experiment to safety-critical work.

Keep in mind

Choose low-risk tasks only. Retain clinical, legal, safeguarding, technical and other required checks. Do not use this exercise to test genuinely unsafe shortcuts or ignore disability-related support needs. If a rule concerns severe OCD or trauma symptoms, seek an approach matched to your individual difficulty.

Sources and attribution

NHS. Every Mind Matters: Problem solving.

NHS. Every Mind Matters: Stress.

Bennett-Levy, J., et al. (Eds.). (2004). Oxford guide to behavioural experiments in cognitive therapy. Oxford University Press.

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